

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

### VEGETABLES, ROOTS, AND WISDOM IN OLD CHINA

EUGENE N. ANDERSON  
*Department of Anthropology*  
*University of California*  
*Riverside, CA 92521-0418*

Jennifer Sepez and Eugene Hunn recently discovered a fascinating quotation: "Only those who can appreciate the least palatable of vegetable roots know the meaning of life." It was ascribed to a Chinese sage, Hung Tzu-ch'eng. To track it down, they contacted E.N. Anderson, who in turn sought out Yenna Wu, colleague at University of California, Riverside, and an expert on Chinese literature. She was able to direct him to two translations, where further lore about this quote could be found.

The first of these, *A Chinese Garden of Serenity* (trans. by Chao Tze-chiang; Mount Vernon, New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1959) was the actual source of the quote. It is used as an epigraph on the title page. This book is very short (60 small pages) and presents excerpts from Hung's thought, freely translated.

Fortunately, the other book, *The Roots of Wisdom*, translated and introduced by William Scott Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984), gives a complete scholarly translation with excellent annotations. Scott's punning title beautifully captures Hung's own double meanings.

The quote had a history. It was not by Hung: he himself used it as an epigraph. It was actually written by one Wang Hsin-min, a philosopher of the Sung Dynasty (960-1258). Wang is almost totally obscure, but the remark achieved fame because it was quoted by Chu Hsi (1130-1200), the great Confucian philosopher whose thought shaped Chinese life (for better or worse) from his time until now. Scott's more literal translation reads: "If one is able to chew the vegetable greens and roots well, he should be able to do all things" (Hung 1984:9). Wang was obviously thinking of one of Confucius' most famous remarks: "To eat plain foods [lit., vegetables] and drink water, to bend an elbow for a pillow: is there also no pleasure in this? But to be unrighteous and thus gain wealth and rank: I regard these just as floating clouds" (Scott's translation; Hung 1984:154). Chu Hsi commented on Wang's tagline: "In looking at the men of today, there are many who run counter even to their own true minds because they are unable to chew the vegetable roots" (*ibid.*).

Hung's book is titled *Ts'ai Ken T'an* in Chinese; this literally means "Edible-greens and Roots Discourses." Essentially nothing is known of Hung except this one book, which was published in 1596 — significantly, almost the same time as Li Shih-ch'en's *Pen-ts'ao Kang-mu*, China's greatest herbal and the greatest pre-modern botanical work in any language. There has even been some speculation that Hung did not exist, his name being merely a *nom de plume* of someone else. How-

ever, Hung had his own pen name, Hung Ying-ming, and it seems unlikely that someone developing a fictional persona would have given it two names.

Hung's book is, of course, not about vegetables. It barely mentions food at all. It is, rather, a moral and meditative tract. Based on Wang's and Confucius' lines, it idealizes the simple life and criticizes fame and fortune. Hung advocated a stoical, realistic outlook, but also full enjoyment of the real satisfactions of life: flowers in spring, simple foods, meditating over a favorite book, and the like. Such a life is *tan*, a word that can mean either "insipid" or "subtly and delicately flavored"—depending on your perception.

The Chao translation is subtitled "Reflections of a Zen Buddhist," but Hung was not a Zen Buddhist. He was actually an eclectic Confucian, grafting some Buddhist images onto a Confucian "root." He advocates moderation, lack of ambition, and being good for its own sake; he explicitly rejects Buddhist quietism and retreat. His ideal person actively helps people, but expects no return from them (while, on the other hand, returning to the full any favor he or she may receive from others). Those who know the joys of plain vegetables will also be free enough from the world to see the best in people and things, and to extend trust. Trials and betrayals are learning experiences, not devastating setbacks. By contrast, those involved in the hunt for status and wealth have to be suspicious all the time. They have too much to lose.

The true sage hides his or her abilities, but never hides friendship and warmth toward people. He or she adapts to circumstances, but never compromises on basic principles. Similarly, the sage avoids confusion and overcommitment, yet manages an active life of service to humanity—being no more attached to quietness than to action.

Thus, what seemed to be a tract on ethnobotany turned out to be a thoughtful and moving guide to humanity. As another Chinese sage once said in a similar case: "I came to learn about farming, but stayed to learn about life."